

TIPS FOR TEACHERS OF LANGUAGE-MINORITY STUDENTS¹

Schools in the United States have become diverse in language and cultural backgrounds. While this diversity brings exciting opportunities for a multicultural society, it can also bring frustration to the dedicated classroom teacher of students who are learning a new language, a new culture and new subject matter. Classroom teachers can help language minority students comprehend content subject matter as they acquire English language skills by practicing the following tips:

1. Increase your own knowledge

Learn as much as you can about the language and culture of your students. Go to movies, read books. Keep the similarities and differences in mind and then check you knowledge by asking your students whether they agree with you impressions. Learn as much of the student's language as you can; even a few words help. Widen your own worldview; think of alternative ways to reach the goals you have for your class.

2. Simplify your language

Speak directly to the student, emphasizing important nouns and verbs. Use a few extra words as possible. Repetition and speaking louder does not help; rephrasing, accompanied by body language, does. Avoid slang and idiomatic expressions.

3. Announce the lesson's objectives and activities

Write the objectives on the board and review them orally before class begins. It is also helpful to place the lesson in the context of its broader theme and preview upcoming lessons.

4. Write legibly

Remember that some students have low levels of literacy or are unaccustomed to the Roman alphabet. Use the chalkboard or overhead projector to write important words.

5. Demonstrate; use manipulatives

Whenever possible, accompany your message with gestures, pictures, and objects that help get the meaning across. Use a variety of different pictures or objects for the same idea. Give an immediate context for new words.

¹ Intercultural Development Research Association, Desegregation Assistance Center-South Central Collaborative, "ESL Strategies for Classroom Teachers"; Derived from the following sources: Short, D.J., "Integrating Language and Content Instruction: Strategies and Techniques," National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, Washington, D.C., 1991 and Sullivan, T., "Sheltered English Techniques in the Mainstream Class: Guidelines and Techniques for Teachers," Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C., ERIC Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics, 1993; Retrieved July 2002: www.eslas.org.

6. Make use of all senses

Give students a chance to touch things, to listen to sounds, even to smell and taste when possible. Talk about the words that describe these senses as the student physically experiences something. Write new words as well as say them.

7. Use filmstrips, films, videotapes, and audiocassettes with books

Obtain audio-visual materials to improve a content lesson. It is helpful to preview the audio-visual materials before showing them to the class, both for possible language difficulties and misleading cultural information.

8. Bring realia into the lessons

Use visual displays (graphs, charts, photos), objects, and authentic materials, like newspaper and magazine clippings, in the lessons and assignments. These help provide non-verbal information and also help match various learning styles.

9. Adapt the materials

Do not "water down" the content. Rather, make the concepts more accessible and comprehensible by adding pictures, charts, maps, time-lines, and diagrams, in addition to simplifying the language.

10. Pair or group language minority students with native speakers

Much of a student's language learning comes from interacting with his/her peers. Give your students tasks to complete that require interaction of each member of the group, but arrange it so that the language minority student has linguistically easier tasks. Utilize cooperative learning techniques in a student-centered classroom.

11. Develop a student-centered approach to teaching and learning

Teachers need to become facilitators and let student assume more responsibility for their learning. When activities are planned that actively involve students in each lesson, the students can better process the material presented and acquire the language as well.

12. Have the students do hands-on activities

Plan for students to manipulate new materials through hands-on activities, such as role-play and simulations. This includes total physical response, laboratory experiments, drawing pictures and story sequences, and writing their own math word problems.

13. List and review instructions step-by-step

Before students begin an activity, teachers should familiarize them with the entire list of instructions. Then, teachers should have students work on each step individually before moving on to the next step. This procedure is ideal for teaching students to solve math and science word problems.

14. Ask inferential and higher-order thinking questions

Encourage students' reasoning ability, such as hypothesizing, inferencing, analyzing, justifying, predicting. Language minority students possess higher order thinking skills.

15. Build on the student's prior knowledge

Find out as much as you can about how and what a student learned in his/her own country. Then try to make a connection between the ideas and concepts you are teaching and the student's previous knowledge or previous way of being taught. Encourage the students to point out differences and connect similarities.

16. Recognize that students will make language mistakes

During the second language acquisition process, students make mistakes; this is natural in the process of learning a language. Make sure that the students have understood the information, but do not emphasize the grammatical aspect of their responses. When possible, model the correct grammatical form.

17. Increase wait time

Give students time to think and process the information before you rush in with answers. A student may know the answer, but may need a little more processing time in order to say it in English.

18. Do not force reticent students to speak

Give the student an opportunity to demonstrate his/her comprehension and knowledge through body actions, drawing pictures, manipulating objects or pointing.

19. Respond to the message

If a student has the answer correct and you can understand it, do not correct his/her grammar. The exact word and correct grammatical response will develop with time. Instead, repeat his/her answer, putting it into standard English, and let the student know that you are pleased with his/her response.

20. Support the student's home language and culture; bring it into the classroom

Your goal should be to encourage the students to keep their home languages as they also acquire English. Many children in this world grow up speaking more than one language; it's an advantage. Let students help bring about a multicultural perspective to the subjects you are teaching. Students might be able to bring in pictures, poems, dances, proverbs or games. They might be able to demonstrate a new way to do a math problem or bring in a map that show a different perspective than that given in your history or geography book. Encourage students to bring these items in as a part of the subject you are teaching, not just as a separate activity. Do whatever you can to help your fluent English-speaking students see the language-minority student as a knowledgeable person from a respected culture.